Commentary: Education in a Changing World

Jim Ostrow
Lasell College

How do we judge the value of higher education? Should colleges, as the Obama administration argues, be rated against set criteria; will this or that type of degree yield employment; how does the so-called value proposition drive the public's view of higher education? Certainly, many do focus the question of value on what is intrinsic to the very mission of higher education: learning. There is often an ironic tone, with authors pointing to an unfortunate state of affairs where predominant interests skirt the problem of learning in favor of matters of cost, access, employment, transparency, etc. No one denies the importance of these issues; the objection is to an absence of focus on the core matter of learning, an absence that can account for a diversion of resources away from it in favor of cost cutting devices, such as replacing full-time with part-time instructors or increasing class size.

The question I pose here concerns the value of higher education for the advancement of a democracy. John Dewey believes that the reduction of the meaning of academic subject matter to attainable fixed assets, static notions of “truth,” works against the development of an enduring responsiveness to a changing world in the interest of social progress. Conditions in support of developing a capacity for such a response may be called progressive; those that vitiate against it may be called regressive.

Education, as learning-centered as it may claim to me, can be either.

In The Public and its Problems, Dewey warns of a conservatism that he describes as a growing social pathology, visible politically as a “riotous glorification of things as they are” (Dewey, 1927: 170). When one considers Dewey’s corpus of work, it is not surprising that he declares this pathology “manifests itself in a thousand ways.” It is a way of perceiving, contemplating, orienting to the world that he sought to expose and rid the world of throughout his career as a philosopher of the nature of human experience, logic, politics, ethics, art, and, our focus here, education. Dewey is concerned with the “hidden entrenchments” (169), the powerful cultural habits that secrete a fixed reverence for existing “truths” – religious doctrine, existing documents and allegiances, the basics to be learned. The habitual clinging to the ideal of certainty (or in philosophy, to its quest) misconstrues the nature of experienced existence; in everyday life, it is what William Blake calls the “mind-forg’d manacles I hear” that entail fear or avoidance of the unknown; a fixation on the stable and controlled. It is a habitual inability to recognize, imagine, be disposed toward the wonder of the unseen, not conceived, yet to come, the possible.

Throughout his political career, Barak Obama has himself promoted the ideal of a flexible mind eager for change. In a June 4th, 2005, speech, he declared: “The true test of the American ideal is whether we’re able to recognize our failings and then rise together to meet the challenges of our time. Whether we allow ourselves to be shaped by events and history, or whether we act to shape them” (Obama, 2005). In the 2008 presidential campaign, he spoke of “the promise of change over the power of the status quo,” and he advised, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are
the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek” (Obama, 2008). The president reasserted this principle again in his tribute to the late folk singer, Pete Seeger (2014). The rhetoric bent on preserving current conditions, often couched today as a preservation of values, is symptomatic of a kind of cultural ignorance, a form of blindness to the very nature of human reality. The world is always changing; in flux. The question is less about whether or not we believe in change than if we are capable of responding to it, imaginatively, intelligently – do we “allow ourselves to be shaped by events and history”, or do we “act to shape them?”

Higher education can serve to either extend or stunt the development of competent, intelligent citizenship within a changing world. A first, basic question to ask is how students value what we have them do as students; what is the value of academic subject matter in their experience? On this point, Dewey is as relevant now as he is in Democracy and Education, where he criticizes a conception of subject matter as just “so much material to be studied” (Dewey, 1916: 169) with students spending most of their time proving or failing to prove that they can express material in the exact form in which it is provided. There is no better prescription for developing a misguided sense of the world as a closed matter, things already settled that need to be “learned,” as opposed to in flux, open to interpretation, change. When Dewey stresses the importance of teachers engaging the needs, capacities, and interests of students, he is not advising pandering or lack of discipline; he means to emphasize the value of academic subject matter as something deeper, or potentially deeper, than what at any time could be recorded in a text. Subject matter can be a field of possibility, a path to seeing the world anew and for affecting change.

President Obama joked a year ago that skill training in the manufacturing sector holds better promise for employment than an art history degree. Critics pointed out that graduates with liberal arts degrees have higher employment rates than those with technical degrees. They also asserted that the liberal arts foster critical thinking and creative problem solving in career and community (Jaschik, 2014). In fact, this may or may not be the case: possibilities for either superficial or deep involvement in an academic subject are as present for art history as they are for more technical or practical fields. Do art history students sit in dark rooms, as Kathleen Desmond has described, viewing slides along with “lists of names, dates and styles to memorize (and regurgitate on tests)” (Desmond, 2008), or do they explore the power of an aesthetic sensibility and art as a lens on the world?

Of course, there is also the broader issue of an environment that vitiates against educational depth. What view of subject matter is reinforced for students today? State mandated exams, as well as college admissions practices based upon standardized tests, have reduced the relevance of subject matter for students to so much stuff to be known and regurgitated. The College Board’s forthcoming changes to the SATs, such as vocabulary changes that will counteract racial and socioeconomic unfairness in the current instrument, or questions and problems that compel students to engage in critical analyses of more relevant texts, are positive. These adjustments do not, however, alter the perpetuation of a static view of academic subject matter. Whether SAT or ACT, the test remains a receptacle for subject matter conceived as demonstrable information; once dumped into the receptacle, it so often ceases to have enduring value, becoming for many students what Dewey calls something “received and left behind” (1916: 187).

Watch our middle and high school students completing their standardized exams or SATs in a frenzied, bubble-filling information-regurgitation, and watch them in their moment of relief when it is over. Watch
them also have nothing more to do with the subject matter they had to learn; they will wait until next time, when they have to gorge themselves with something else to leave behind. Education becomes dominated by what Neil Postman calls an “aberrant process by which a method for doing something becomes the reason for doing it…the test score is taken for reality” (Postman, 1979: 87). Students may experience subject matter as an exigent text – a closed matter once learned – or as an only partially defined field of opportunities for engaging the environment. When they see subject matter in the latter way, its import lasts – it endures as an impulse to inquiry and a disposition to seeing things anew. The alternative is subject matter forgotten directly following the course, because it has been discarded through the vehicle of the test, it has been learned, the student has taken it and doesn’t need to take it anymore.

To Obama’s credit, he has sometimes warned of the pitfalls of standardized testing, cautioning against teaching to the test, and encouraging dialogue about richer and more flexible forms of school assessment (Obama, 2014). What we need are national policies that directly and forcefully articulate the primacy of education for fostering precisely the dispositions toward positive, social change that the president has himself endorsed. His perspective on culture and change could be expressed through educational policy as a forthright celebration of learning through exploration, discovery, productive, forward-thinking action and projects, with corresponding assessment and reporting methods. Surely, teachers and professors understand within their own fields of expertise that subject matter engages their energy and imagination not as a collection of recorded knowledge but as unfolding opportunities to know and do more. When we ask our students to engage subject matter in the former sense, we compel them, notwithstanding our admonitions against grade consciousness, to value the content as something to receive and leave behind.

What is an educator’s purpose? As philosophers, historians, literary critics, mathematicians, social scientists, biologists, artists, designers, business or health professionals, we are driven by the new problems, angles of understanding, approaches to solutions provided through the lenses of our individual and intersecting fields. It is a simple truism to say we agree with the Socratic axiom that wisdom requires ensuring students recognize continuously how little they or anyone knows and understands about themselves and the world. And, yet, how thoroughly does Socrates’ axiom penetrate the ethos of an institution; stated differently, to what degree do the academic fields that we love have lasting value in the lives of our students? That is essentially the question posed by William Heard Kilpatrick in his famous essay “The Project Method” (1918), where he concludes that the student experience must be “wholehearted, purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment” lest what is being learned become reduced to what Dewey calls, “just something to be learned” (Dewey: 1916, pg. 169).

The point I am making about the value of academic fields in the student experience should not, however, be confused with a focus on individual students’ mental states. Dewey warns that the progressive education backlash against traditional, authoritarian methods of instruction too often suffers from the same fallacy of the latter, “only in an inverted form.” The fallacy is to miss that educative activity is located neither “inside” of the student nor within dictated, static subject matter. It is located in experience that is as infused historically with what has happened for the person as what has happened in the wider world, and which is as undergone by persons as much as it takes place within the surrounding environment. “When the emphasis falls upon having experiences that are educationally
worthwhile,” Dewey writes, “the center of gravity shifts from the personal factor, and is found within the developing experience in which pupils and teachers alike participate.” Academic subjects are then no mere collections of information, of fixed truths. The measure of their value are “the questions they raise, the problems they create, the demands for new information they suggest, the activities they invoke, the larger and expanding fields into which they continuously open” (Dewey, 1930: 322) The purpose of the educational relationship is no longer to stuff information into students in waiting. But neither is its purpose to treat students therapeutically, nor leave them to their own devices, worrying constantly about how they feel. Its purpose is purely and simply to be in the world, together, collaboratively, as novice and expert practitioners of “larger and expanding fields” continuously opened.

Learning can mean cramming in information as “subject matter” and being done with it. It can also mean believing in and becoming disposed to the power of academic fields to open mysteries, to anchor present and future living in intellectual and creative pursuit and discovery. In order for education to reach its transformative potential, what Maxine Greene calls the “lure of incompleteness” (Greene, 1995: 15) must be the overriding frame for our conception of subject matter and the interaction it incites. Education can be an opening for the development of a sensitivity to an environment in flux, where meanings are not settled, fixed, and where democratic citizenship filled with the anticipation of and solutions to problems is possible.

Notes

[i] For earlier, abbreviated versions of the arguments posed in this essay, see (Ostrow: 2014; Ostrow: 2014b; Ostrow: 2015)

[ii] The Obama administration’s push for a national college rating system is driven by two principles. On the one hand, there is the argument that, in the words of Deputy Under Secretary of Education, Jamienne Studley. “In today’s world, college should not be a luxury that only some Americans can afford to enjoy; it is an economic, civic and personal necessity for all Americans.” Thus, the administration seeks to rate Colleges to the extent that they open their doors to all students, regardless of ability to pay. The other driving principle is post-graduation employment – the extent to which degree completion leads to success in the job market. There are various flaws that have been identified with the measures one might employ in a rating system, ranging from the limits of graduation rate comparisons to the difficulties in weighing the relative “value,” not always purely economic, of career choices. Critics argue that higher education is about more than what any national ratings systems could possibly assess, including the inattention of common measures to variations among US colleges in mission and focus.

References


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